



Hollow Hopes by IreneRays

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Summary: Takes place after season 3. Life goes on after the Buyers move to Indianapolis. The loss is heavy on everyone's shoulders and time is doing its best to heal the wounded young hearts. Just as everyone is about to settle, a 'code red' rattles their new reality and brings back memories El wishes had remained long forgotten. (Rating might change)

1. Chapter 1

"There's blood on the floor"

Date:?

"Shit!"

That curse had left his lips far too many times that night.

The starless night, the moon shyly hiding behind the clouds of an upcoming fall storm, the fog blanketing the woods; all of it together comprised the perfect recipe for the two of them to escape. Only they were not sneaking out of their parents' house to go and make out in the back of the car, like in one of the romance novels he had read. No, those two were attempting a tad bit harder operation with a higher risk of mortality.

He felt liquid under his right palm and spat another curse. He stifled a groan and pressed his hand harder against the belly of the body he was supporting. There would be no casualties; not on his watch, and certainly not *her*.

"We are not going to make it; you are bleeding your guts out!"

"M'Okay... It's not much," the woman he was supporting weakly mumbled.

Oh sure, not much. His hand was soaked in the warm liquid by now and her body was going limp and he was panicking and *they* were close; too close for comfort! How much blood loss can a person tolerate before they hit the daisies?

"I can take them down!" he offered, even though he knew her answer. His shoulder was going numb and his feet were slowing down. But he could still put up a good fight.

"No..." she breathed out and winced.

Speaking was a Herculean task for her. He was surprised she could

muster a few syllables after being so brutally butchered. And he had been an idiot and plunged the knife out of her, not thinking that it should have stayed there to restrain the red disaster that shot from her wound like a fountain. This only served as proof that going against her was bound to be disastrous.

However, the more the creatures behind them closed in on them, the more he considered screwing the plan sideways and make another reckless decision; breaking the promise they made before operation 'run for your life begun'.

The woman lost her balance and tripped over a stray branch, dragging him down with her. He was quick on shifting his weight to his strong foot and use gravity to his advantage to turn what could have been a dramatic fall to him sweeping her off her feet, now carrying her bridal style. He had never been more thankful for his Hula training. That, however, did not ease his erratic heartbeat and how scared shitless he was when he felt her body going cold and numb.

"Hey! Hey, stay awake! Stay with me!" he called out to her and got no response, "SHIT!"

The rustling from the trees and the spine-chilling growls grew louder. Shit, indeed!

Amidst his raging panic, an idea struck him. Relief washed over his face.

Phi had insisted they reserve their energy for extreme situations. Though his own definition of extreme most definitely included saving their asses from monsters trying to slice them to shreds and devour them, he knew better but to disobey her (much to his survival instincts screaming at him to do so).

And so he found a loophole.

'She said I should not put up a fight. She never forbade me to do *this*!' he mused.

At this point, he had lost track of where he was headed, how many

steps they had taken. He quickly lifted his arms, squeezing her head a bit uncomfortably in his chest, to switch his eye patch from his right eye to the left. That would do a lot better.

He frantically searched around him until he spotted a squirrel having some alone time with some nuts he was. It wasn't a bird, which he would have preferred, but he didn't have the luxury to be picky.

He stared at the intensely animal for 5 seconds, mumbling something without once halting. The squirrel lost all interest in its nuts and bolted away. To his surprise, the squirrel was going on certain, *very specific* directions. Good, at least that would save them some time.

Following the little creature, they reached a pile of debris of what might have been a beautiful cabin. Without thinking twice, he jumped over the wire and rested Phi's body in the solid room with four walls left standing and rushed back out.

The squirrel had curled up in the stairwell, looking up to him expectantly. He gave it a small smile and squatted to pet its head.

"Thanks, little guy".

He perked his head up at the sound of branches breaking. It was loud enough for them to be at least 500m away. He jerked himself up and stretched his ears, following the sound. To his dismay, it was nearing. They hadn't lost them after all. He looked at the squirrel, big pitiless orbs innocently staring back.

"Go, little guy! This will get messy! GO!"

The squirrel bounced off the stairwell and scurried away deep in the woods. The tree shook near his field of vision and he braced himself.

Looks like there was no avoiding it after all; at least when she woke up he could claim he had no other choice. It was the truth after all.

Taking a fighting stance, he kept his uncovered eye glued to the woods as trees closer to his range began to move as well. His blood pumped in his ears, his breath was deep and loud. She would most certainly disapprove of his lack of cool, especially since he was capable of being way calmer than this. But she was bleeding her life

out in a dusty bed and if she did not die of blood loss it could be an infection, debris deciding to fall off or the monsters eating them alive he deemed it fair to give himself a break and admission to panic all he wanted.

The rustling stopped and he was dragged out of his thoughts and into a blood-freezing quiet. He knew that quiet. It was the kind of quiet the preceded a huge catastrophe or a big surprise. He hated both.

From the deadly silent now woods, a gooey mass was tossed at the end of the stairwell. He only had three seconds to figure out said mass was the squirrel's dismantled body before hell unleashed on him.

For a fall day, the heat was nearly unbearable. Running under the merciless sun rays was insufferable for any sane person, except for the PE teacher who refused to compromise with 10 laps instead of 15. Mike Wheeler was in the process of rightfully surpassing his PE teacher in insanity as he sprinted a distance way longer than the one covered with the 15 laps *and* on an inclined ground.

PE had never been his cup of tea. So, he didn't think twice about skipping it and launching himself to the Cerebro to give El a surprise call. Beads of sweat streamed like waterfalls down his nose, his shirt was stuck in his skin and he had caught a very foul smell by the time he reached his destination. He could not give horse shit about it.

El was to be homeschooled her first year in Indianapolis which meant there was a 99% chance that she was home when Mike adjusted the frequency.

"Hey El," a silly smile was plastered on his lips just by mouthing her name, "It's me, Mike. Do you copy? Over"

After a few moments of silence, he spoke again.

"I know I am supposed to be at school but I figured I wouldn't miss much in PE," he chuckled as he suddenly became aware of how sweaty he was, "I still made up for the lack of exercise, though".

Silence again.

"And um... I wanted to hear your voice. I know we talk, like, every day –and Dustin is on the verge of charging me with Musketeers per minute- but I ... I miss you... like, a lot!"

No answer.

"Only one week till Thanksgiving!" he announced excitedly, "We are skipping the last day at school –Don't tell Ms. Buyers, or she'll tell my mum and she will ground me for a month. We are prepping a big surprise for Will...Don't say anything about that either! And I ... I might have a little something for you".

Again, he was met by the persistent static noise instead of her lovely voice.

"El, are you there?"

Most of the time she was spending at home, so it was beyond strange she wasn't responding; especially at this time of the day. Mike slapped his forehead as he recalled their last conversation from yesterday. El had apparently picked up a new hobby the past months and her schedule had some alterations due to that. Curiosity was still flaring inside him as his girlfriend insisted on showing him her new skills instead of just telling him what it was she was doing every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

She wouldn't reply, but Mike still picked up the Cerebro and spoke one last time.

"Oh shit, forgot it's Wednesday and you are... well, busy. I'm hanging on a cliff here! It's not 'track and field', no theatre club, no basketball, no creative writing... I don't know ... I'm drained and super curious! I guess I'll call you later... uh yeah, talk to you later... I-"

He pursed his lips and exhaled loudly. After all these months, Mike still hadn't had the guts to say it. It struck him hard, especially since she had said it so effortlessly last summer. As much as he insisted that he was waiting to see her up close to tell her, Mike knew deep down he was just chickening out. And for no rational reason

whatsoever!

"Dude, you stink!"

Dustin emerged from the slope, huffing like a chronic smoker. Mike ignored him and handed him the Cerebro. Dustin's eyebrows rose.

"Done so soon, Romeo?"

"She's not home," Mike stood up and shook the grass away from his shorts.

"Right, she's busy with her cool new hobby! You sure she's not sucking face with another dude?"

"Piss off!" Mike elbowed Dustin hard on his belly. The boy with the gummy smile snickered and kneeled in Mike's place.

"Want to stick around with me and Suzie?"

"Thanks for the invitation but Limah are not my thing," he smirked and Dustin flipped him off. Mike savored his victory.

"Have fun with Suzie".

And with that Mike took off. When he reached his home he went straight for the shower, ignoring his mother's yells. All he could pick up was 'now' and 'need to talk'. Sounds easy to piece together what she had politely requested, but Mike's brain was too fried from the sun and his body too sweaty to handle.

"Mike, this is Lucas! Do you copy? Over!"

The supercom on Mike's bed buzzed for what Holly had counted the thirteenth time. Mike made his entrance rubbing his hair with a towel and was met with a displeased pouting Holly.

"Your friend is too loud, Princess Anna is upset" she exclaimed and crossed her arms above her chest, looking even cuter. Mike chuckled; the message received and ruffled her hair.

"I'll handle it, Holly, don't let your guests wait!"

Hollyarched her back and scrunched up her nose, pretending to be mad at him -which for Mike was adorable- fixed her tiara and marched out of the room in style. Mike shook his head and chuckled; his sister is going to take over the high school when she gets there.

"Michael Wheeler, it's Lucas! Have you fallen in a comma?-"

"For the love of God Lucas, *shut up!* He must be talking with El now!" another voice Mike recognized as Max's echoed through his supercom.

"It's Wednesday!"

Mike rolled his eyes, a tad bit disappointed in himself that he had forgotten El's schedule and his friends had not.

"I'm here, over!"

"The man of the hour!" Lucas yelled in the supercom, "We are going to add the final details today. Since you are free, want to come to give us a hand?"

Mike shrugged, "Sure"

"Cool! Meet us at Mirkwood in 20. Over and out".

Mike quickly got dressed, shoved his supercom in his bag and dashed down the stairs. He made for the door but collided with his mum's hand blocking his way. Mike stumbled on his own feet from the sudden halt on his speed and looked at his mum in indignation. Karen Wheeler's face was serious, more than he had ever seen it. Mike rummaged the corners of his mind to figure out if he had done something to get him in trouble.

Instead of the mouthful, he was anticipating, to Mike's astonishment, his mother's look melted from angry to concerned as she grabbed him by the shoulders and twirled him around, inspecting him closely.

Okay.... What was that about?

Karen took a step back to observe him better and then sighed in indignation, placing both hands on her hips.

"You are not injured".

"Was I supposed to be?" Mike raises a brow, confused by his mother's disappointment.

"Our first aid kit is missing. Nancy and Holly are fine, you are fine, Ted is *definitely* fine."

Mike snorted. The only hazard his father's activities expose him to be obesity and muscle atrophy.

"Maybe you placed it somewhere else"

His mother's face immediately made him retract his statement. Karen Wheeler always knew the place of every tiny object in their house. As endorsed in it as she seemed, Mike couldn't say he shared her concern for the missing kit case.

"Look, I'm sure it's somewhere around, ok? I gotta go! Lucas and Max are waiting for me!"

Ignoring the rest of his mom's calls, Mike dashed out of the house, hopped on his bike and took off to Mirkwood, oblivious to Nancy staring at him like he was a lunatic from the bottom of the stairs.

He had grown in height the past few months, his lanky limbs hindering his pedaling. The possibility of saving up for a new bike has crossed his mind, but Mike Wheeler has that wish lower in his priority list.

Soon enough, he was approaching the ever so familiar road leading to the Buyers House, now the residence of a sweet elderly couple. Lucas' bike and Max's skateboard were rested in a nearby tree and Mike parked his bike next to his friends', making way through the fresh piles of autumn leaves in the woods.

It wasn't long before he heard two loud voices yelling at each other. 7th break up already? Mike snorted and made his way towards his friends.

"That's not what I meant and you *know* it! Stop horsing around!"

"Well, *excuse* me for using common logic smarty pants!"

"According to common logic, are you not supposed to –"

"To be rebuilding Castle Buyers?"

Lucas and Max turned to an annoyingly amused Mike. Max pointed at Lucas and accidentally (or not) poked his nose hard.

"Mike, would you please explain to this dumbass-"

"Nope"

"I swear to God, Mike, she almost ruined our work with her-"

Lucas stopped midsentence, infuriated by Mike's lazy grin.

"It's not funny, Mike!"

"Oh, I think it's ridiculous, like- more ridiculous than you drinking New Coke".

The couple glared at him before continuing their argument. Mike paid them no mind and got to work, fixing the roof of castle Buyers. He was way over cloud nine to actually care about whatever it was that Max did to set their months of work in grave danger -something about a wooden guitar making a and hot glue? Mike didn't care. In one week's time, he would see her again, hold her, kiss her, maybe even grow the balls to actually say 'I love you' face to face.

When she had confessed her feelings, his brain had frozen like a Popsicle. It was irritatingly clear to everyone who knew them that they had deep feelings for each other but for her to have such deep feelings resonating for him was beyond all of his hopes and dreams. She loved him. Eleven loved him. The more he replayed their last moments in his head, the more warmth enveloped him; a warmth shortly replaced by stinging cold. The Buyers move out tore a piece of him. From his eyes, he was losing her all over again, not to mention he felt guilty for not having the chance to properly make it up to Will for being a jerk.

The first weeks were rough for all of them. Max found out that she

missed the company of another female, showing El the world outside her box and watching her grow and do girl's stuff together. Not to mention how torn she was about losing Billy. Sure, the guy was an ass at first, but he was still Max's brother and the what he endured, Mike wouldn't wish it upon anyone, not even the filthiest scums of the earth. Everyone missed Will's soothing silence and childish enthusiasm. He and Dustin seemed to latch onto part of their childhoods that gave a unique color to their friendship, one that had now faded slightly without Will's presence. And dear God almighty did Mike feel like a mess without her touch, her kisses, and her smile, her sweet innocent and even newfound sassiness.

And so he gathered the gang and decided to do something big for their friends, something to blow their minds once they visit Hawkins for Christmas. For Will, that would be rebuilding Castle Buyers and even upgrade it to a sturdier version of itself. For El, Max and the boys had different plans. Mike did not know what Max had in mind, but Lucas and Dustin had decided to venture the debris of Hopper's cabin and gather some of El's stuff and give them to her as Christmas gifts. As for Mike, he was working on a more personal gift. A giddy smile would lace his lips every time he would imagine her reaction. Christmas just seemed so far.

At first, Dustin and Lucas had asked Mike to tag along in their scavenges and for a while, he had considered it. The instant he was a few feet from the cabin, however, the hammering in his chest and the dizziness that overwhelmed him forced him to decline his friends' request. Ghosts of so many memories lingered in the debris of the cabin. Moments of him and his beloved, Hopper's side glares and tomato faces. But also the kindness and love between a father and a daughter Mike would sometimes catch glimpse of. The pang of guilt that strike every time Hopper's face flashed in his mind was haunting. As much as he hated to admit, Mike had been disrespectful to the former chief, who had taken care of El in such hard times and put up with their teenage hormonal revolution. Mike had not appreciated the man enough, the selfishness that pulled his strings last year resulting in his first break up and his grave mistake of not treating Jim Hopper the way he deserved.

It was only harder when El would have a mental breakdown during

their conversations. Sure, it wasn't a frequent phenomenon, she did not want to worry him, but when it did happen, Mike felt himself crumble to a mass without a soul.

And so he avoided the cabin and tried his best to shake away any negative emotions, wanting to make Thanksgiving a good memory for all of them.

He was dragged out of his musings when both his and his friends' talkie emitted a loud noise.

"Guys! This is a CODE RED! Get your asses to Hopper's cabin RIGHT NOW!"

Lucas and Max ceased their bickering and Mike dropped his hammer. For a moment that seemed to drag too long, they were back the cabin, hearts growing erratic, scared for their lives, petrified of the Mind Flayer taking El away and consuming them whole. Dustin's voice erupted again and Lucas was the first to react.

"Dustin, what happened?"

Dustin spat an array of 'Holy shit!' before he could compose himself and blurt out.

"Just get over here!"

The trio was cemented in their places. They tried to reach Dustin a few more times, but either he was ignoring them or... No! It can't be! The mind Flayer is gone for good! The gate is finally closed! There is no way those monsters are back to haunt them. Worry enveloped them for Dustin, all alone dealing with a code red situation meaning God knows what.

Exchanging a knowing nod, fear written all over their faces, they launched onto their bikes and made for Hopper's cabin-like lightning bolts, praying that Dustin was okay.

Dustin spat a curse for what felt like the millionth time that day when his mop of curls was caught in a low tree branch. Oh shit, that pull hurt like a bitch.

He hadn't been able to reach Suzie that day, or the past week really, and he was eating himself out. The last time they spoke, she was so cryptic and distant and threw a bunch of hints that screamed 'I want to break up' at him. His friends' had warned him about the potential failure to maintain such a relationship, but his infatuation for this cute, nerdy and –as he insists- hotter than Phoebe Kate girl blocked every sign as plain noise.

Or perhaps it was the fact that she was the first girl to ever pay him attention, as Mike had so crudely stated one day he was acting like an asshole. Dustin had noticed that he has been acting out a lot lately and while it royally pisses him off, he can't help but partly understand him. Or not understand him, since what he has with Suzie is not even close to what Mike and El have. Whatever his own relationship was called, Dustin had a feeling it was nearing an end. Mike can be a huge jerk when he is mad and says things he doesn't mean. He had apologized to Dustin the moment he was back in his senses. What he said that day stuck with Dustin and it was one of the very few things that Mike had blurted in the heat of the moment that proved to be true.

His love life was, to put it delicately, fucking hopeless.

By no means did Dustin want an ominous cloud to loom over him that day. If anything, he was the one to roar all of the sad clouds away from his friends' in his own loud way, spreading his happiness virus all over. But the possible future break-up he could face and the place he was marching towards under the scorching heat made it heart for the young boy to not let some sort of sadness set in the pit of his stomach.

Dustin and Mike had been in Hopper's cabin so many times the past month that they had learned the route by heart. Dustin especially could hike there with his eyes closed, hence why he allowed himself to space out and look on the ground most of the way. Maybe he would have acted differently if Mike was there as well. He was alone, however, and somehow was grateful about it, since he could ponder over his relationship in peace.

If he hadn't stumbled upon a large shard of glass, he wouldn't have noticed he had reached Hopper's cabin until he bumped in it. Dusting

sighed, leaving his musing behind and reaching for his backpack to produce his supercom and report his whereabouts. If all went well, he and Mike would only have to come one last time and then only occasionally for preservation. He still hadn't looked up to the cabin itself.

Adjusting the frequency, he opened his mouth but no words came. The shard of glass in front of him suddenly seemed so intimidating it had him squinting at it.

Wait, why was it even there? It's so large and obvious they couldn't have missed it all this long, especially since-

Dustin's eyes shot wide and he gulped, cemented on his spot. Two droplets of blood, so tiny he could have missed them, adorned the sharp ends of the glass; and it looked fresh. With a fear-stricken face, Dustin dared to look up and had to contain a scream (or more like a mixture of a screech and a dying otter).

Hopper's cabin was back in the state it was before the Mindflayer had attacked, except it was dusty and full of spider webs and dirt, like an abandoned haunted house. That's not what had Dustin petrified. Bloodstains, starting from the shard of glass near his feet made a bloody red route leading to the wide-open door of the cabin. A window was broken and also stained red.

A familiar high-pitched roar shook the living soul out of him and he yelled for help at his supercom. With a lump in his throat, Dustin dragged his wobbly chicken legs inside the cabin. At the stairwell, he saw the corpse of a mangled squirrel, the metallic scent of fresh blood and the guts spilling out made him gag. The monstrous screech echoed again. This time it sounded like it came from further away. Instinctively he looked up and only for a second, he acknowledged something bizarre about his surroundings. He didn't have time to dwell on it though. Dustin could only assume that that thing was leaving; still, better safe than sorry.

Snapping out of his trance, he sprinted in the cabin and shut the door behind him. Slumping against the door frame, he went to heave a sigh, but what he saw next made his breath hitch and instead, a squeamish squeal left his lips.

Blood, everywhere! On the floor, the walls, the ceiling, it was everywhere his eye could reach. The smell was ten times worse there and Dustin slapped a hand in his mouth. The scene reminded him of a grotesque slashed horror film background, only it was real, it smelled real and it...felt real.

Dustin jumped when he noticed the puddle of blood he was stepping on. He didn't know how long he stood there, frozen in time until he noticed something. On the floor, there were blood trails that lead straight to El's old room.

"Son of a bitch!" he whispered weakly, "EL?"

No answer. Dustin set one foot after another, heading for the dreaded room. He winced every time the floor creaked under his feet, the smell of blood only intensifying the closer he got.

"El?" he called out again, unsure why. His superhero friend was meant to be safe and sound in Indianapolis. Yet, Dustin couldn't help but associate this mess with her somehow. How could anyone blame him for that after all he has been through? Oh shit, if El is hurt – especially *that* badly- Mike is going to freak the fuck out! Dustin was panicking enough as it was.

The room was close enough for him to peek inside and he almost cursed aloud when he saw the back of a man he was sure he had never seen before. Scared shitless, Dustin crouched down behind the open door and prayed to God almighty he wasn't found.

He closed his eyes and took deep breaths, listening to the man's loud footsteps as he paced around, sometimes dropping something on the floor and talking. With his weak and muffled voice, Dustin couldn't make out what he was saying and he couldn't care less. He only wanted to be the fuck away from there at that moment.

After some time, he heard more footsteps, this time coming towards him and his heart did a somersault.

Yup, this was it. These are Dustin Henderson's final moments on this galaxy! Farewell world!

A large, bony hand yanked him back to reality and he jumped and shrieked rather ungentlemanly like. A confused Mike stared down at him, Lucas and Max behind him.

"What the fuck man? So you want to die? Hide your asses quickly!?" he whispered-shouted and the dumbfounded trio.

Then he took in his surroundings. The cabin was back to how it was after he, Mike and Steve had finished the last repairs. It was clean, like blood-free and no broken windows clean. Dustin felt his skull squeezed by two huge rocks. What the shit?

He shoved the trio and looked around frantically, all of the blood and the glass shreds and the man he saw before gone. He glanced at his friends, hopeful they might have seen what he did even for a split second. The looks he received were incredulous.

"Dude, you okay?" Lucas approached him first.

"You... You guys saw that right?" his voice forced out of his throat as if he hadn't used it for days. The trio shared a look.

"See what Dustin?" Max was now next to Lucas, followed by Mike.

A wet snout met her sweaty face and enveloped her in messy licks. The girl groaned in disgust, but could not suppress a smile. She ran her fingers through the thick white fur of the dog and gently pulled her face away giggling.

Eleven Hopper was in a desperate need for a shower. Unbeknownst to Joyce, she had skipped today's homework to have some extra time for her new activities, and as much as she did not want to admit it, she had made great progress today. Or at least, that's what Koi insisted on.

The mass of fur and cuteness was persistent and continued demonstrating its affection until a low whistling sound distracted it. The dog barked happily and ran to the youngest of the Buyer's family.

Will Buyers hugged his buddy and shot El a small smile, which she

returned breathlessly.

"You really went all in today, didn't you?"

El nodded, still catching her breath. Will petted his buddy once more and took a seat next to her on the couch. His nose scrunched up once he was at a closer range.

"You stink like an old sock!"

Eleven elbowed him lazily and gulped down a generous amount of water from her bottle. When she had remembered how to breathe, she steeled herself and looked at Will, who deciphered her face in a heartbeat.

"Help with math again?" he smirked mischievously. El nodded indifferently.

Eleven was meant to be Homeschooled her first year on Indianapolis and so she was home most of the time till she was familiar with the area they were staying and the bus routes. Her schooling usually took place in the afternoons as Joyce with Will helped her catch up with all the knowledge a teen her age has already acquired from school. Eleven learned quickly and soon enough, When Joyce took a second evening job, El was handed a bundle of homework to work on herself in the mornings and Will was meant to check on her or the both of them would study together. All went well and recently Joyce had discussed with her the potential of registering in High School after Thanksgiving, in which El beamed in excitement.

The first month in Indianapolis had been an emotional roller coaster for all four of them. With Joyce and Jonathan job hunting and Will figuring out his way around a new school environment, time spent together had been minuscule for at least the first month. El insisted on attending school, not only out of excitement but with the intention to relieve Joyce of her tutoring duty.

The middle-aged woman had been struggling to stay afloat in a rough sea and while El wasn't in a healthier mental state, she wished to make the hurt easier for Joyce to tolerate. The hurt is good, his words were burnt into her memory, but in her eyes, Joyce Buyers has had

an overdose of hurt. Joyce believed the opposite; that El has been in a tango with danger for far too long for someone her age. Still, El stood her ground and tried her best to alleviate everyone's pain, minus her own. It was easier to keep her own head above water when she had to support someone else's weight. Everything else felt lighter than her heavy heart weighing down her insides, the lump of lead scratching her throat.

She surrendered herself to books of any kind to absorb her to their world or enrich her own with newfound knowledge to mull over. She took up jogging every morning, a much more preferable start in the day than crawling under the bedsheets after waking up breathless, drenched in sweat and tears, missing the smell of freshly defrosted eggos and whipped cream on Sundays. She immersed herself in anything that fell on her hands; books, TV, comics, running, cooking when Joyce was busy or tired (and still feeling a pang of guilt the first time she burned the kitchen rug), requesting mixtapes from Jonathan talking to her friends back in Hawkins.

Hours upon hours were filled with the Clash, the X-Men, soap operas, Algebra and English Literature, Lasagna dishes still developing in quality and the morning breeze stinging her skin in an almost salvation way as she kept pushing her limits; a very effective way to muffle cries and sobs, she noticed. Dare she leave a fraction of time empty, she would break down? Inevitably this was a regular happenstance the first two weeks and it wound up with her and Joyce curled into a knot of limbs and sobbing their hearts out, Jonathan trying to console them and Will muffling his cries from the doorstep. Lately, however, those desperate calls to the universe for mercy only occurred at the dead of the night, her fluffy blanket replacing Joyce's arms, Jonathan's music his comfort and the shadow on her wall the ghost of Will's presence. EL was grateful she was making progress with her grieving, though Jonathan would beg to disagree.

Unlike Joyce, Jonathan was the type of person that kept to himself a lot, but not hard to approach. The photography aficionado had shown her acceptance and kindness since day one as a family. El appreciated his subtleness, his taste in music, his kindness and his weird way of expressing himself. When he noticed her self-

proclaimed progress, he knew something fishy was up. From their time together he had come to realize that El was a person to put others first, to protect them, if not from monsters from other dimensions then from their overwhelming feelings daring to consume their soul. And she was doing that at the expense of her own health. Hell, she had lost her powers because she was pushed too hard and as much as she assured Jonathan that she was okay, he couldn't help but recall Mike's words and realize how correct the 14-year-old had been. They had treated her like a machine.

Jonathan and Joyce were keen on letting EL know they were there for her to talk to, to lean on and let it all out. She politely declined their offers most of the time, only when the nightmares were too haunting to bare on her tiny back did she share some of the weight with the two. Then there was Will.

Not to say he hasn't been kind at her. He lent her his comics and in El's book, that's what friends do, according to Dustin's teachings. Moving together with the Buyers made a realization land in her head like a ton of bricks. El had never spent much quality time with Will. Sure, she helped save him from the Upside Down; she had seen him go through her, in his most vulnerable state. She had witnessed his childhood getting knocked by a wrecking ball in a week's time. Deep understanding resonated within her for the boy, but she had never really grasped the chance to get to know him better, leaving many things to discover about him in their new life as brother and sister.

The first of them was that, despite his manually polite demeanor, Will was distant; like 'avoiding your eyes, stumble on my words and do everything in my power to not run into you' distant. El had known from her interactions with the party that Will had never been a social butterfly, choosing to listen and observe. He had an appreciation for the quiet that El related to and cherished. But this kind of distance he had set between them was not an expanse of his introverted personality.

More than once, she had tried sorting things out, but to no avail. Will either politely declined or busied himself with something else, rendering her unable to interrupt him; she was too polite for that. When they studied together, she only asked him questions about her homework, dropping subtle hints she prayed he would catch on. He

didn't. That did not discourage El, however; only perplexed her, since she could not find another way to approach him without stirring... whatever reason he was using to put that excruciating distance between them. She had no choice but to carry on with her discreet antics until Will gave in and decided he was ready to come forward.

Until one day, around the one month mark, she was talking with Mike on her supercom. El was a giggling mess as he quoted her the hilarious discovery of Mister Clarke (which she still didn't understand a word of, but Mike sounded so cute when he so eagerly explained something, she couldn't help it), when Will stormed in her room, clutching his sketchbook and trying (but failing miserably) to suppress an icy glare.

The Will she saw that day was the polar opposite of the quiet, reserved and polite little boy she had grown accustomed to.

"Can you keep it down? I'm working on something" he had said through gritted teeth, his tone freezing El's spine. Will was mad; like murderously mad, but also something else; something she couldn't pinpoint.

"I'm sorry-"

"You better be!"

And with that, he has exited her room in fumes just as quickly as he had entered, without bothering to close the door. El stood on her bed, rendered speechlessly. Will had never acted out on anyone, no matter how much he was hurting. Will had only been mad at two occasions, party's words. And it both occasions it was nothing near what El had just experienced. Mike, still on the receiver's end, heard everything. To say he was shocked by Will's demeanor would be an understatement, but part of him had already deciphered the message under the outbreak.

With shame in his voice, he told El about when they had broken up and how he had been a jerk to Will. At last, everything made sense. The distance between them seemed way less daunting because now El knew the nucleus powering it and was more than determined to diminish it. She had bid Mike a short goodbye and made her way to

Will's room across her own.

Cross-legged on his bed, hand frantically brushing the charcoal on the paper, a frustrated William Buyers greeted her sight. He didn't acknowledge her, too immersed in his work, or simply ignored her. Only when he felt the dip in his bed did he jerk his head up to meet a very concerned and hesitant El.

A starring competition was initiated, with Will throwing daggers into El's stubborn, pleading eyes that refused to look the other way. She didn't move a muscle, her eyes unwavering as she waited for him to talk first, to talk to her, to let it all out. After a few seconds, more like millennia, Will pursed his lips, something akin to embarrassment wrenching his features.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled like that," he said in what sounded a forced calm. El did not respond, earning a frustrated sigh from Will.

"What now? Isn't that why you came here?"

Silence

"Look, I get it, ok? You miss Mike and sometimes you forget that others live in this house as well! Just keep your voice down and it's all cool!"

Eleven looked at him, soft dough eyes boring into his soul to what he could only interpret as pity.

"Will-"

He snapped.

"I said I get it, alright! Just keep your damn voice down cause I don't want to hear my new 'sister' drooling over a supercom with my best friend who has apparently forgotten I exist!"

"Will"

"Actually, you know what?"

The Buyers boy did not realize when he sprang up from the bed,

dropping the sketchbook and charcoal rather unceremoniously on the floor. El only stared at him, unwavering, which seemed to only infuriate him more.

"It's not ok! In fact, it sucks! And I don't even know why it sucks! My best friend is all over you but I can't blame him because he loves you and he spent nearly a year not knowing if you were dead or alive! You are all over Mike but I can't blame you because he is important to you and you love him and you never did anything wrong! You have saved our asses more times than I can count! Hell, I owe you my life! And you know, maybe that's why it sucks! Maybe if you were a bitch it would be easier to be mad at you but you are my life savior and I feel like a dick for being jealous over my friends growing up and leaving me behind and when everything is ALWAYS ABOUT YOU!"

He panted heavily, lungs drained like a marathon runner reaching the finish line. The floor looked smudgy and blurry and that's when William Buyers realized he had averted his eyes from a stunned Eleven to the ground as tears welled up and threatened to fall.

Eleven placed a hand on his skin and he flinched. Is her skin always so cold? Had his thoughts always had the tendency to fly at random directions when he was embarrassed; when he was bare and vulnerable and open? His broken lamp, the charcoal stains on the carpet, the slaps of rain droplets on his window, every little thing suddenly seemed more interesting than looking up at El.

"Will, I understand," she whispered, just like that.

He wanted to slap her hand away and yell at her, NO! She did not understand. She had no idea what it felt like lagging behind like that and being torn between hating two very important people to you and accepting the inevitable. His mind bounced back to when Mike was comforting him and assured him that, and he quotes, "El would get it, she always did". How could this underdeveloped 15 years old get anything he was experiencing? How could she get what it's like feeling abandoned by your own friends after being gone and almost dying? Then he nearly slapped himself for what dared cross his mind.

If anyone, eleven knew best what lagging behind felt like; how being

scared, alone and misunderstood and torn between your emotions and the right decision. Sure, their experiences were not identical, yet El could still understand him in more ways than anyone could. Her life up to the age of twelve had been a literal hell, and here was Will Buyers, broken and bruised, back from the dead, complaining about the life offered to him because he can't digest his friends growing up and falling in love; his best friend choosing her over him.

How stupid of him! Mike would never rank them, even if he did love El in an entirely different way. They had made up just before Will moved but hearing them being all mushy with each other for endless hours didn't make it easy.

"I'm sorry".

Finally, he found the courage to look up. Eleven was giving him the softest look he had seen her wearing and brushed the tears away from his wet cheeks. When did they begin falling? Will was clueless.

All he knew was that this human being with a gravely wounded soul had the kindness in her to not only comfort her but apologize to him! He opened his mouth but El shushed the word flood that was about to let loose.

"I love Mike. You love him too. And we spent too much time together. That hurts you and it's our fault, mine and Mike's. I can't be with him all the time. I have Max, Lucas, Dustin; everyone else. I love them too, but it's not the same," she inhaled sharply and licked her dry lips, "Still, that is not an excuse for me to make you, or anyone of our friends feel excluded. We are a party, we are one together. So from now on, we can make time for everyone, not just each other. And I ... I hope there can be time for us Will. You are a good person and I want to feel like I am your friend".

She meant it, every word. From that day onward they tried their best to manage their time with Mike and talk to everyone. Saturday evenings eventually became their sacred hours since El demonstrated a keen interest in learning D&D from the one and only Will the Wise. He took his role as a teacher seriously, El was surprised at the zeal he portrayed when teaching math to her who was equal to when he taught her about the different races, classes and all the other

necessitates of an infant player thrust into the world of Dungeons and Dragons.

Spending time with Will and giving him more time with Mike gave her the chance to get used to the distance. No, long-distance relationships are not a stroll in the park, at least not when you are expected to save the world and you don't know when or if you will ever see the ones you love again. Investigating new shores, El discovered her love for literature and stories, the thrill and high from after a long run and how much she loved the stiffness of her muscles after extending her limits (not fighting for her life) and how easily she could grasp scientific concepts if she put her mind into it...a huge if on her part since she proved to be quiet apprehensive of those subjects.

El found glimpses of happiness in all those little things, forming a character that felt so right, one she never had time to discover and develop before (hell, she couldn't breathe for one second before she had to save someone!). They made time fly faster and the pain more bearable and just put some color in the empty canvas inside her. Hopper would be proud to see her fighting, striving towards happiness. Every single word of his letter pushed her to be stronger, to continue growing up, growing as a person.

And apparently, El had grown to be quite a good sister as well, and she couldn't be prouder for that. She and Will became almost inseparable. When they weren't playing teacher and student or talking about everyday nonsense, they were engulfed in blissful silence, each minding their own business and simply basking in each other's presence; the presence of someone who can appreciate the quiet and peace.

Back to the present, Will did help her finish that math homework before Joyce got back home. Jonathan was meeting up with a guy he met, another photography aficionado. The three Buyers had their dinner accompanied by small talk and fits of giggles.

Will felt light and joyous seeing his mum slowly but surely moving on; just like El did. Moving away had torn his soul in half. He was leaving so much behind; friends, memories, laughs and cries, endless nights of playing and days of biking and fooling around. But that was

not all that the deceptively peaceful town of Hawkins meant now for Will Buyers. It also meant monsters and portals and Upside Down, doctors and the Mindflayer and waking up feeling like an alien in your own body. As much as it pained him to leave all the good memories behind, he had to run away from all that haunted him. There was no shame in that, he needed a break or he would suffocate. He felt trapped. El felt the same, Will was sure of that; so did his mum.

Hopper's death had weighed her down more than she would let show. Joyce is the strongest woman her son has ever met, but she wasn't invincible. She sure did a damn good job coming off as one though. Will knew she was doing her best, and now that he saw that smile on her face, one that did not seem forced or tired; he decided he did not need to speak. He did not need to mention the extra packets of cigarettes in the bin or the bottles of alcohol he found when he was on cleaning duty, or the nights he heard her trying to muffle her cries in her pillows.

What Will wanted to mention were El's nightmares? Hopper had told Joyce how the light bulbs flicker and break or how the furniture shake like an intense earthquake hit them when El has nightmares, so Joyce was on alert and checked on her twice the first days they lived together. The light bulbs and furniture met the sunrise intact Joyce assumed it was due to El's powers being gone. That did not mean, however, that El did not have nightmares or that it was any less torturous to hear her screaming, wailing like she was being stabbed to death and screaming the name of the person that always made her feel safe; Mike. She shook so violently in her sleep she once broke her wrist by slamming it in the nightstand's corner.

Will, while not such a reactive dreamer, dealt with his REM demons as well and he silently understood her, tried to comfort her. The night of when they laid their hearts on the table, El had one of the worst nightmares. She was writhing in the mattress restlessly, clutching the roots of her hair and screaming, only this time it wasn't Mike's name. It was a simple, blood-curling 'no'. If the dream was so frightening that not even Mike could save her from it, Will assumed that it must be the worst she had had so far. And so he rushed to her room, shook and yelled her awake, getting punched twice in the process. He didn't

care, he wanted her to feel safe, to let her know she was there and whatever she was dreaming about is not there. That she can fight it, like he fought his nightmares every day and come victorious, not unscarred but a winner nonetheless. Neither could take each other's pain away. They could only alleviate it.

Will slept on the floor of El's room that night. Ever since then El has been calling his name as well whenever afraid because deep in her conscience, she knew he would come. Ever since that night, she loved Will buyers as her brother and the feeling flowed both ways. Will had spent more nights in El's room than his own. When sleep rejected them, they would read books together in comfortable silence or reminiscing memories from different parts of their lives. Will had found another person that understood him like Mike, hell maybe even better than him. El had found a brother who could guide her, unbiased and kind. Those late nights weaved a bond between them stronger than they expected. A bond that made William Buyers care too much to not mention to his mother the content of El's dreams; specifically that particular odd dream that has been stuck on repeat like a broken record ever since the night of their truce.

El refused to let Joyce worry. Will partly understands her and knows that he would have made the same decision were he in her shoes; he had already kept secrets from his mother for the same reason. Will is also a loving brother who suffers in the mere thought of his loved ones in pain. And then there was something else; a feeling in his gut he couldn't shake off.

It was this cold hand palming his nape, a thousand needles stabbing his back and time flowing excruciatingly slowly. It was a feeling very similar to the one he got whenever the Mind Flayer was close. At the same time, it was very different from it. It never intensified, no matter how much he moved around to see if he would locate the source that was causing this feeling to bubble up inside him. While the icy palm on his neck would rise up dread and fear, this cold touch spurred sadness and loneliness. The weirdest of all; he got that feeling whenever El had that particular nightmare and something in him screamed at him that it was connected to the Upside Down... somehow. And that was why he had listened to El and kept it a secret from his mother. That's the only reason why today at the dinner

table, it only took one warning glance from El to shatter his impulse to run his tongue. Joyce Buyers had been through enough. Will and El loved her too much to upset her over a 'feeling'.

Time flew with them conversing carelessly and joking around, El skipping dessert to try to reach Mike, Joyce sending them to bed with a kiss on their foreheads. Once he heard the door to his mother's room close, Will grabbed his sketchbook and set of pencils and tiptoed his way to El. She was expecting him. His set of blankets and pillows were already laid on the floor. He gave her a grateful smile and lied down, setting his sketching supplies next to him. El hovered at the edge of the mattress, her big hazel eyes trying to convey all she was feeling at the moment. Will smiled at her reassuringly.

"I'm right here".

She nodded, returning his smile and rolled to her side, dozing off. Will wished he could fall asleep so quickly. Ever since she began training with that guy she called Koi, she was out like a light the moment her head met the pillow. Koi, another subject El refused to let him mention to anyone. The guy was a complete mystery. Will had seen him in school; quiet, reserved, average student, excellent at sports with a biker's vibe going on. Will knew him as Byron Yoshimoto. He had never heard anyone call him Koi. Not like the guy had many friends in school as much as Will knew. He doesn't know exactly how he and El met, only that she suddenly expressed interest in his hobby and joined him. Will trusted El and knew she would never hurt Mike; their lovesickness was palpable from miles away. But her secrecy about her relationship with Byron –or Koi or whatever- has his mind weaving theories of his own.

Are they only just engaging in their hobby? How does he treat her? Why does she refuse to let on any details about their time together? Is he forcing her not to tell him? Is Byron forcing her into any bad habits? What if he is trying to- No! Will shook his head. El would never allow him to. She is oblivious to some social concepts and sometimes even naïve but she is not that naïve and she loves Mike.

Before Will knew it, an hour had passed with his tossing and turning. He was trying to decide whether he should take the fall and be a snitch for her own safety or trust her in that matter as well when a

pillow landed on his face.

It had begun.

Will bolted up and was next to her in a heartbeat. He grabbed hold of her shoulders and steadied her restless tiny form as much as he could. The familiar sight of her agonized face, beads of sweat drenching the sheets, her veins popping in her neck as she screamed her lungs out has not become any easier to bear during the past months. Will steeled his courage, inhaling sharply through his nose and shook her gently a first and then more frantically when she did not respond.

"El! El, wake up! You are safe!" he kept chanting reassurances of that like until she shot upright so abruptly she head-butted him hard. Will fell off the bed with a soft thud; he was just too light to make much sound, protesting at his throbbing forehead. He could feel the swelling of a bump forming.

El did not seem affected by the collision as much. Her eyes were darting around the room and her breathing was heavy and uneven.

"Will!"

Forgetting his stinging forehead, he was next to her again, hands on her shoulders. El's breath seemed to even up immediately and she looked at him with eyes as wide as an owl's, lips pursed and tonguetied.

Will didn't have to question her for the contents of her nightmare; he knew the pattern. Something about this newfound terror in her eyes, the palpable shock reverberating from her, told him that something was different that night.

Without a word, he snatched his sketchbook and pencils and nodded at her, signaling her to take her time and reassuring him that he wouldn't go anywhere. El closed her eyes and steadied her breathing more, sweat now cold on her skin and hair –now longer and blond on the ends- sticking on her skin.

When she was ready she began reciting the chain of events haunting her nightmares and Will's hands raced against the paper, bringing

those images to light for the world outside of her head to see. When he reached the part that always made his blood run cold, he froze as a whole. Something had changed. And it scared Will how he did not know how to interpret that change. It only made things worse with how El; the bravest person he had encountered in his life, was horrified by it.

A/N: Hello hello there! New fan of Stranger Things here who totally did not binge the entire three seasons in two days. So, I have this idea going on, don't know where it will end up but oh well, thought I'd give it a try before I allow 'Tolkien' to take over my mind completely (i know I'm late!).

Anyways... thank you for reading the first chapter. I hope you enjoyed it and have many delicious questions to hang from till the next one! Reviews are wholeheartedly appreciated!

Never forget to smile and stay awesome!

Lots of love from Irene Rays

2. Chapter 2

"Breaking news and peace"

Nancy Wheeler slumped on her office chair rather ungraciously and closed her eyes. The ghost of a headache was already hitting her temples and she inhaled deeply through her nose in a futile attempt to ground herself from the tailspin her mind had descended into. The obscene amount of papers cluttering her desk was anything but helpful.

Under any other circumstances, Nancy would have been floating way over Cloud 9 for landing a position as a journalist in Hawkins's post, a fitting reward for all of the trials and tribulations she overcame chasing said job. Only she didn't earn her name the way she was striving to do. A bitter taste lingered on her mouth every time her eyes fell upon the framed piece of paper on the wall behind her; her very first article.

"Under the glow of Starcourt: A tragedy for the 4th of July"

Not exactly the widespread of a mad rat epidemic, but certainly more attractive to reporters from all over the country, wolfishly gobbling every crumb of information they can get about what on earth had happened to the Starcourt Mall. That insignificant smudge on the map that was Hawkins had earned its place in the big news spotlight since the Chemical Waste incident almost two years ago. Now it was parading next to the Breaking news. Hordes of tourists had swarmed after the incident, hungry to get a glimpse of the mall's debris where the infamous 'Invasion for the Russian military' and 'Vicious bombarding to eliminate evidence of their underground activities' had taken place.

None of them ever managed to get closer than the police tape allowed them to and no one besides a handful few knew what truly went down that night, Nancy included. With earnest support and the resources of Dr. Owens, she concocted the most convincing tale and fed it to the press sooner than any other reporter could blink at the sight of the desecrated mall. Climbing the ladder by taking advantage

of her connections with powerful people was not the way Nancy had dreamed to be redeemed of the social stigma inking her as a female reporter. It was the need for a good cover-up story from someone that would influence the masses and keep their eyes on blinders long enough for the hype to subside. And who might be more fitting for that than Nancy, who had already worked on the post, had a way with words and was a survivor of the incident? There wasn't time for second-guessing the ethical part of that decision (or Nancy's wounded pride). Her services were crucial.

Nancy wasn't thrilled when Hawkins's post took her back as a full-time reporter but accepted it with an open mind, thinking that despite how she got in, she can still prove herself with her hard work and dedication. She did manage to land a couple of more front pages and while she savored the newfound respect she was earning from her colleagues, she didn't miss the sideways glances and hushed whispers when they thought she wasn't looking. It stung deeply, mainly because they did have an excuse to badmouth her, at least from Nancy's perspective (or that's what she assumes they do). It wasn't a male superiority complex; it was the sketchy way in which she had climbed the ladder. Thankfully, between loads of papers, a single piece of rough handwriting was meant to serve as Nancy's opportunity to silence everyone's restless mouths. But until she finds the courage to start digging in her work, Nancy stares blankly at the ceiling, basking in the sunlight showering her through her window.

She thinks of her mother, who was so proud of her and supported through heaven and hell. She thinks of her father, who was strangely more active in the scarce occasions they were all together as a family. She thinks of her siblings; Holly, who was growing up blissfully unaware and Mike, who was a huge bag of nerves and teenage hormones. Just like her, he was now barely home, though for entirely different reasons. She thinks of Steve and Robin and how their comical presence seems to lighten up her day whenever she borrows a movie. She thinks of the rest of the Party and how they all, despite their childish bickering which seems to get more ridiculous; seem to grow up faster than they should be. Nancy's thoughts linger on a particular redhead a little longer.

Only a week ago, Mike and Lucas were occupying the basement

doing who knows what. Nancy finally had some time to relax at her bed, suddenly more comfortable and inviting than she ever remembered it when the persistent ring of the doorbell yanked her out of her daydreams. With a frown plastered on her face like a part of her own skin, Nancy opened the door reluctantly to find Max Mayfield. The usually unstoppable fireball of a girl was now reduced to a slumping mess, eyes red and puffy, eye bags contrasting against her pale skin in a way that made her look like a ghost of herself. Nancy's eyes caught a shade of purple in her neck which she had tried –and failed– to cover with a blood-red scarf. Nancy didn't mention her observation and showed her to the basement where the guys were.

Half an hour later the trio emerged looking gloomier than a kid who was just told the breaking news that Santa is not real. Mike was escorting them to the exit, Nancy giving them a friendly goodbye. Then the boys had some moment of clarity and dashed back to the basement for something Mike absolutely had to show Lucas, leaving Max waiting in the doorway. Nancy did not want to pry, she really didn't, but through their shared nightmare those kids have vacated a special spot in her heart and if the bruise on Max's neck is the kind of bruise she suspected, Nancy couldn't just stand by. So she didn't.

"Hey!" she called out, earning the attention of two piercing blue eyes. Nancy smiled and patted the seat next to her on the couch. Max looked on the floor as she hesitantly accepted the seat, fixing her scarf nervously.

"Is everything ok?" Nancy asked.

Max licked her lips which seemed to dry. Nancy noticed that her skin looked equally dry and rough; Dehydration? Max remained dead silent. Nancy reluctantly went to the kitchen and fetched a glass with cool water, bringing it back with her to the couch and handing it to her red-headed companion. Max took the glass, attempting not to appear too eager, and greedily gulped down its contents. She gave Nancy a small smile which she returned just as warmly.

And then the floodgates opened.

"Neil was angry today. Something about work or maybe my mum, I

don't know. He was just-" she drowned a sob, but could not contain a snuffle.

Nancy had heard about Neil Hargrove's violent tantrums, but never actually had visual proof of it. Billy wasn't the kind of person to look weak. Neither was Max, only Max had people that had shown her it's ok to be vulnerable, to talk, and to ask for help. It was a concept Max was still adapting to and only ever showed her true emotions fully to Lucas, but there she was. Touched by the single act of being offered a glass of water, she finds herself bursting in tears in front of Nancy Wheeler. Nancy didn't seem to mind.

She gently scooped Max's tiny frame in her arms and let her bawl her eyes out, pour all of the pain and struggle she had been building up ever since Bill died; ever since she took Billy's place as Neil's rag doll to dump his own stress and issues while she was also shouldering the loss of someone whom, under better circumstances, could have been a good brother to her. There was something else there too.

When Max's cries were reduced to soft sobs and sniffled, Nancy cradled the girl's face in her hands and looked at her, really looked at her. The emotion Nancy couldn't put a name on before; guilt. Max saw the curiosity etched in Nancy's face.

"I should have known. I... I should have suspected something. When El told me I... I should have realized sooner. Maybe... maybe he would still be there".

A newfound wave of sorrow spilled from her eyes and whatever Nancy was watching became background noise. Nancy caressed her ginger locks softly, mattering lulling reassurances and promises she wasn't sure she could keep. Everything is going to be ok. But is it? How could it when she lives under the same roof with this asshole?

Nancy wanted to speak up, say something that will drive all of her sadness away. She missed her chance when the boys came rushing back and froze when they saw them. A second later Lucas was at Max's side, retrieving her from Nancy's arms.

Max assured him multiple times that she is ok, but had to give in to Lucas insisting on walking her home. Deep down, Nancy knows she

didn't want to deny his offer. Even after all they had been through, old habits die hard, especially the habit of pushing others away for your own safety.

Before Max exited the Wheeler household, she peeped through the main door and called out to Nancy, a soft Thanks slipping from her lips. One mere word carrying a myriad of emotions towards the older female and she mirrored them back with the warmest of smiles and a slight nod.

Nancy hadn't seen Max since that day. Their paths just didn't cross and work seemed to be sucking every possible minute she could spend doing anything else but typing and editing and keeping the rapt attention of unsatiated reporters to her rather than any possible clue about the Starcourt Mall that could arouse suspicion. And so Nancy kept a mental sticky note in the back of her mind to have an in-depth conversation with the teen when she gets the chance.

Lastly, her mind drifted to Jonathan; her beautiful, quirky and sweet Jonathan. Compared to her poor brother, she had it way better. A driving license guaranteed her weekend visits whenever she had the time. That didn't mean the distance between them didn't sting. She missed him like crazy; especially those days when there wasn't much to occupy her mind, or when she chose to take a breather from work. The instant she would snap her brain out of its focus mode, his face would emerge and a big smile would stretch her lips.

That was one of those moments. Nancy raised her hand on face level, fingers stretched to expose the fading scar on her palm, their shared trauma. Sighing with longing, she begrudgingly cut that particular moment short. That paperwork won't finish itself, unfortunately.

And so Nancy dug in it with full concentration, using her set of well-established criteria to categorize each story and chose the ones she would edit. Oh right, they also entrust her with editing now. How that serves Dr. Owens' purposes, Nancy has no idea. Go figure.

One particular piece, the most summed up and vague one of them all caught her eye or more specifically the big bold Indianapolis in its title. Apparently a group of homeless thugs from Chicago had been caught red-handed in Indianapolis and arrested for multiple killings.

There was a list with the names of the victims and Nancy froze when she read the name of the last one, the one that earned said team their doom. It was a name she had stumbled upon on frequently even before she began gaining access to classified information, thanks to Owens. That man had been the cause of so much pain on suffering. He had been haunting the memories of the Party for the past three years and even though Nancy had never seen him, what she knew about him was enough to boil her blood with hatred.

Right there, with neat innocent letters, posing as an unlucky citizen, the name mocked Nancy, stirred anger and curiosity and sock to her bones.

Martin Brenner.

Ditching the rest of the papers, Nancy Wheeler stuffed the paper in the pocket of her jeans, gathered her belongings in a hurry and rushed out of her office to find the reporter who wrote this story. She knew, she just knew, that there was way more to it than what there was in that article.

There is always more when it comes to Martin Brenner and Nancy fears what she may find if she pursues the quest to fill in the blanks her co-workers don't know about. One thing is for sure, however.

Whatever she discovers, it's going to be bad news.

"Guys, I'm dead serious! I wasn't having a panic attack or whatever! There was blood, *everywhere*! And then there was this trail to Eleven's room and that weird looking man and-"

"Dustin," Lucas hopped off his bike and leaned in on the brick wall, "Look, man, it's not that we don't believe you, but..."

"But what?" Dustin followed his act, hands raised in the air in pure frustration, "You think I would make up something like that? I'm not a jerk, Lucas!"

"I know, I know! It's just-"

"We think," Max quipped, "maybe you have been spending too much

time in there".

At that, Dustin huffed and stormed towards the video store. Mike sprinted to his side with long strides.

"Dustin, come on man! We are sorry! We don't want to be mouth breathers, we really don't. But maybe Max is right. I mean, after that day we all have a hard time even thinking about this place. Hell, I haven't set foot there for weeks because I am scared shitless!"

"I know what I saw!" Dustin insisted, voice firm. He couldn't process the fact that his own friends were calling him a loony. Okay, maybe not to his face, but trying to bring it gently does not change that much. Dustin felt betrayed. Shock still rattled his very soul at what he had witnessed and through his perspective; his friends were taking it very lightly!

"Steve will believe me! You'll see!"

Inside the movie store, Steve Harrington tried his best to contain a long, exasperated sigh. The fifth or maybe sixth buffoon of the day had made his grand entrance and was *demanding* to rent more than the upper limit amount of movies because, and Steve quotes 'I am the only force that keeps this wretched place alive. He had even posed like some kind of fucking royalty like Steve was supposed to bend the knee and kiss his filthy chucks- the nerve of some people.

Steve was one tiny push away to chewing him off (or call out Robin to do it since –and Steve won't admit it- she's way more stylish at it) when Dustin and the rest of the nerds strolled in. Different shades of upset marred their faces and the initial relief of seeing a more pleasant –though still annoying- company morphed into concern.

Robin, it is then.

The peanut-head was maybe at his fourth attempt to go scot-free and Steve sealed his decision.

He shouted her name and she came from the back with a shit-eating grin and her traditional quote 'save your ass again, dingus?' Steve honored her with a fake laugh and an eye roll before nearly jumping

off the counter and meeting the Party.

"Sup shitheads?" Steve crosses his arms above his chest.

Without any ample explanation, except for the very vague 'We have a code red!' that Dustin blurted out –and Steve did not miss the eye rolls from his friends- before he yanked his hand and dragged him in the back of the store.

"Okay, okay! What the hell is going on?"

And then Dustin frantically recited his horrified experience of Hopper's bloody cabin and the mysterious man; or rather the back of the said mysterious man that looked *really* intimidating.

Steve could tell that the trio didn't believe him and was he honest, Steve also thought of his friend's story as a horrible nightmare. It really wasn't out of the question, considering all the shit that went down last year. The hope and despair on Dustin's face melted his heart and dissolved any attempt to express his doubt into nothingness. Steve heaved that long-awaited sigh.

"Look, buddy, I believe you," he placed a hand on his shoulders.

"You do?" the combination of hurt and relief in his face broke Steve's heart.

"Yeah, yeah definitely!" he nodded rapidly.

"I knew you would!" Dustin offered his signature gummy smile.

"Oh come on Steve!" Lucas interjected, "Let's say we do believe Dustin. It's been four months and nothing has happened! Plus, what went down in the cabin has scared us all shitless!"

"Yeah, it was probably some kind of PTSD symptom or something!" Max added.

"Yeah, you see, that's where you are wrong, carrot," Steve began without even thinking what he was saying, "Because Dustin was stuck in a Russian base when you were living said nightmare. If anything, I would expect Dustin to get a panic attack in the new mall's elevator

rather that hallucinate bloody floors".

And then it hit him. Steve was right. *Holly shit*, he was right! A red alarm went off in his head. His words felt a ton heavier after everyone realized their significance.

Dustin wasn't there. In fact, Dustin should have nothing more than fond memories of the cabin from the times he and the Party were visiting El (ok maybe not all of them were fond memories. The events of 1984 made sure of that). Of course, it's weird, if not alarming, that Dustin should have such a... vision? Illusion? Hallucination? They are not sure anymore.

Apparently Mike was way ahead of them. Steve hadn't noticed how deep in thought he seemed when they entered the store. Mike's mind was on haywire. Their bike ride to Steve's work had oiled the gears in his brain and helped him see outside the box. Something was bugging him, something was clearly amiss. Only when Steve spoke did everything fall into place.

Paralyzed, rendered speechless, all five of them exchanged worried and shocked looks. It was more than clear that whatever Dustin had experienced was not a result of trauma. Sure, it wasn't real per se, like, it didn't actually happen. But it was something; something they should look into right now!

"I'll ask Robin for her car keys!" Steve snapped out of it first, the rest nodding and rushing to their bikes. The sooner they figured this out the more prepared they will be for... whatever is coming.

They might not be able to completely perceive it yet, but something is coming. And it terrifies them how they have no idea what it might be.

It is four am and Will Buyers has yet to catch a wink of sleep. How could he with all of the stomach-churning images laid in front of him?

He steals a glance at El to find that she has dozed off. After what she has seen, every ounce of her being was begging for some peace and

the mental excretion caught up to her and forced her eyes shut. Unfortunately for him, Will has nothing to give him that small push to Dreamland. If anything, the sheets of paper sprawled all around him like a halo are doing everything in their power to keep his brain gears working, resulting in his brain going with a hundred miles per hour.

There was some tossing and turning and mental cursing before Will accepted defeat. Any effort of getting a shuteye tonight is futile. And so he gave into his brain cravings and for the past two hours, scrutinized every piece of work he had made out of El's nightmare, inspecting the new –and most concerning- parts longer than the others.

According to El, it goes like this: She is twelve years old again, in the lab, guided through the mundane, white hallways that have everything in common by her papa. Despite the monotony, El has learned to pick up tiny little details that help her determine her surroundings and know exactly where she is heading. The small brush of paint that stained the metal window of one of the chemical storages told El that they were heading to the bath. Will had made sure to draw a close up of the window and said brush and so he laid the piece of paper next to the previous one. What followed was the face of her Dr. Brenner, looking down at her and smiling as he guided her. A speech bubble was drawn next to his face, that sickening smile never ceased to cause apprehension and disgust bubbling up in Will's stomach.

"Before we go to the bath, there is someone I want you to meet, Eleven; so you should behave yourself. Will you do that for your papa?"

"Yes," El answered plainly on the next panel. William remembers his hands trembling the first time he sketched her in her hospital gown, head shaved, much younger and thinner and certainly malnourished.

They go down a couple more hallways, which El remembered in excruciating detail before they arrived in one of the testing rooms.

Two people were waiting there. One of them was a woman, around Brenner's age; long silver hair wrapped in a neat low ponytail,

elegant ironed white suit and piercing blue eyes. The other was a girl, about two or three years older than El, pale skin, skinny, wearing a similar hospital gown, heart-shaped face, bright green eyes and golden hair in a boyish haircut. Opposed to the strong authority radiating from the older woman, the girl exerted a much kinder aura.

Never taking the eyes of the girl, El sat down opposite of her as Dr. Brenner greeted the woman, who eyed El with keen interest and something else Will does not want to try and decipher.

"Dr. Cody, aren't you a sight for sore eyes?"

The woman, Dr. Cody, gave him a coy smile, "Likewise, Dr. Brenner"

And then both of them turned their gazes to the children seated on the table. And then they both approached each other's kid, each other's *project*, and kneeled down to match their heights.

"Well, well, would you look at that," Dr. Cody devoured the sight of El with her eyes, "The infamous Eleven. My, my how you've grown!"

El simply stared at the woman, breathing loudly. She was not used to anyone outside the lab and therefore, an unfamiliar face so close to her personal space terrified her. Especially since said face resembled a carnivore rounding a pray.

"I could say the same about five," Dr. Brenner looked no differently at the other girl, at five. She returned his gaze much calmer than El and offered her hand for a handshake. Dr. Brenner seemed surprised for a mere heartbeat before shaking her tiny hand. Then he looked at El who resembled a deer in the headlights.

"Eleven don't be rude to our guest. Dr. Cody is a very important person and we need to behave," the last words spoken firmly, a hint of a threat lingering between the lines.

Not knowing what else to do, El copied Five's action and offered her hand for a handshake which Dr. Cody returned, her grip too tight for comfort. Her eye twinkled and she burst into laughter that (according to El) was so high-pitched and malicious it could belong to a witch. It was a strange contradiction to her seemingly kind face.

"What a peculiar child," Dr. Cody marveled. Then she turned to five.

"Now dear, remember subject eleven lacks a little in oral communication abilities. I trust that this boundary of communication poses no hindrance to you".

Words. So many, too many of them! Too big, too complicated for young, illiterate El to understand. But Five apparently has no trouble at all.

"No, mama, we will be just fine," she speaks and El is startled for a moment. The sound of a voice belonging to a person so much closer to her age does something weird to her heart. She hasn't met anyone that is not thirty or older and so being with Five, who she later learns in fourteen (only two years older) gives her a weird sense of relief.

"Excellent," Dr. Brenner creeps behind Eleven and places a large palm in her scrawny shoulder, "Now, let's let them get to know each other, shall we Bailey?"

"Why of course, Martin".

The two scientists exchange some knowing looks and then exit the test room, leaving El and Five alone. From this point on, everything is blurry and El seems to remember different parts of her encounter with Five every night. Then the next thing she knows, she is on the bath, on the void, staring at the slimy back of the Demogorgon.

It was the night she opened the gate to the Upside Down, the night she escaped this horrible prison she knew as home. Only it's different from what she remembers. For starters, she doesn't escape alone.

Five is gripping her hand tight as they run with all the speed their skinny legs allow them. She is constantly reassuring and encouraging El, sayings like, "We can make it!", "Just a little further", "Come on, we can do this!".

Then everything moves on fast forward, every little step El took to escape is the same, with the only difference that Five is there with her as well. And then they are out in the cold, facing the night sky for the first time in their lives, or at least El's life. From afar, Five spots

the construction tube and points it. El gets her message immediately. Their feet are carrying them in autopilot, rushing to crawl to safety.

And then someone grabs El by her wrist and her bike collides with a hard material, a piece of armor. On instinct, El is about to shove the man away, the familiar tickle in her fingertips every time she uses her powers barely sensible under the adrenaline pumping through her veins. Before she can even blink, she hears a loud groan and then is released from the iron grip of her captor.

She rubs her wrist, finger shaped bruises beginning to form and turns around to find Five standing protectively in front of her, her hand stretched in front of her and blood dripping from her nose. El's captor is wincing, tears escape through his goggles and then he is wailing.

Shocked to the bone, El is frozen. What does she do? Does she help Five? Does she let her finish the soldier or does she do it herself? Should she go on without her?

Luckily for her, Five spares her a quick glance and mouths loud and clear, "GO!"

El is overwhelmed. She wants to flee, she really does. But a pang of something harsh hits her heart, what she now can identify as hesitation and maybe guilt. This girl just helped her, is she any less of a monster than her captor if she leaves her behind.

Five seems to read into her inner dwellings and yells, this time louder.

"GO! I'll be ok! I'll meet you once i-"

But she is cut off and EL releases the loudest scream she has ever heard. At that moment it took to turn and look at El, Five's grip on the soldier had weakened and he seized the opportunity to plunge a knife in her stomach. Both Five and El froze as Five crumbled to the floor, eyes wide and mouth open, unable to produce any sound.

Steps echoed from the distance and that did it for El. She didn't want to, she truly didn't. Leaving Five behind hurt like a physical blow to her chest, but at that moment, she had no choice. She couldn't risk a

fight. El was too weak at the moment. Five's pleading gaze sealed the deal and with one last glance at her savior, El crawled in the tube and the rest is history.

She didn't turn to look back at Five again.

It's confusing, to say the least. Everyday El claims to remember nothing about Five. Whenever Will asks her, she says that her nightmare is about the day she escaped, alone. Only after she is fresh after the horror does she remember Five, the mysterious girl that saved her life for reasons unknown. And she only remembers her till she falls asleep again. But Will doesn't forget, cannot forget.

Through the paper, Five's kind green eyes are staring at his soul. Will has no idea if she is even real, yet he can't help but feel grateful; grateful to Five for saving El who in turn saved him. The mystery fog surrounding her is hard to clear, harder when El denies her existence on daylight.

There are billions of burning questions in Will's mind. Why is El dreaming of Five now? What triggered those nightmares? Why doesn't she remember anything related to Five in the morning? Should he tell the others? Should he get a second opinion? And more importantly, is Five even real? And if she is, is she still alive? How can Will find her and solve the mystery?

All of those questions were piled messily in Will's head, nearly nauseating him. Needless to say that the new part of El's nightmare sprung up more question marks that Will could happily live without.

To imprint the images on paper, Will almost ran out of red marker. There was just so much blood.

A house, deserted and dusty, filled with trails on the floor, violent brushes on the walls, even stains dripping from the ceiling, all crimson and moist. Then the perspective of the dream switched and suddenly El was watching everything through someone else's eyes; a woman, looking down at her bleeding stomach, her vision misty. Through a door left ajar, she caught glimpses of shapeless things flying around and staining the house with more blood. Will concludes that to whoever or whatever those pieces belong to is probably dead by now.

Then there's a muffled cry Will portrayed as an array of letters peeking through the door. The last thing El remembers is the woman wincing in pain, consciousness fading, using the last ounce of her strength to utter a single phrase, one that made the least sense of everything Will has heard so far.

"He doesn't want to play".

What the hell? Who is she talking to? What does that even mean? Who does not want to play with whom? What game? Is this some kind of coded message, a metaphor?

Checking to see if his sketches are in order, Will runs a hand through his tired face. There are just too many blanks and El's daytime amnesia is not helping.

This, *whatever* this is, did not just pop up randomly. It's completely unrelated to the past year and while it is connected to El's haunting past in the lab, nothing could justify how a whole new person sprouted in her life out of nowhere.

No, this means something. Will is not sure what yet. Maybe it's a vision, a warning for something. But what?

All of Will's answers lie with this green-eyed mystery of a person, Five and the only way he can think of getting to her is with El's powers. That is if she has recovered them and *if* she wants to try and find her. Another hindrance is the state of distress El wakes up in after the nightmare. Since she can only remember Five for as long as she stays awake after she's up, Will considers this the best time to try.

But when will they be able to do that –again, *if* El wants to and is strong enough? Will it be too late if El won't get her powers soon? What will happen if El refuses to look for Five? How will she react when Will proposes the idea?

Unlike his other questions, these ones do have answers; the ones about the state of El's powers. Only El holds that answer.

El and someone else.

Jonathan Buyers has it bad for Nancy Wheeler. That's no news for everyone, not even Byron Hassan who has only known Jonathan for two months.

September had just rolled in, Byron's favorite season. He adored the way the pinkish and orange rays of the setting sun pierced the clouds, like a gentle reminder that the light will prevail in the dark. When a sparrow stood at a naked branch and sang so melodiously, Byron just had to capture the moment, and the many others that followed. The sky was on his side that day, blessing his eyes with magnificent content to capture. Apparently, Byron was not the only one with the same idea. A few meters behind him, a boy with tacky hair was also enraptured by the works on nature. Byron recognized his camera model and was surprised by how old it was. Without thinking, he approached the boy and said the first thing that came on his mind.

"You must be very patient to handle that model so well".

And that's how Byron met Jonathan, through their common passion for photography and, as they discovered later, very similar taste in music. Byron gladly showed him around the city and rambled endlessly about his favorite photographers and his favorite magazine issues, something he rarely had the chance to do and he was enjoying a keen listener. Jonathan sucked his teachings like a vacuum and the two boys soon found themselves working together for the local newspaper.

Naturally, Byron had mentioned his girlfriend, Luna, an electronics engineer freshman, and passionate environmentalist. And Jonathan had also mentioned Nancy, the powerful journalist and badass gunslinger. Only Jonathan did not merely mention Nancy, the boy could write a book about her. If Hassan were to count the words Jonathan had dedicated to her, he could write a novella. He gets it, he really does. Luna currently resides in New York, a much longer drive than Hawkins, and he misses her badly. Not so badly as too pierce his new friend's eardrum.

Byron is a person of privacy and likes to take his time opening up to people and also discovering them. When Jonathan felt comfortable around him, and Byron could tell he was ecstatic to find someone he shared so many things in common, he allowed his mouth to run

freely. Even his brother claims he hasn't seen him so open. Byron likes to make others feel comfortable, it seems to come naturally to everyone that meets him, but when he is bombarded with mewling and drama, his capacity of understanding thins. His brain needs a break, needs some alone time.

And so today he decided to cut their chat short. It's a little selfish on his part and he can't help the sense of guilt that creeps in. But Byron needs a breather. Jonathan's love life is not his only concern.

"Yeah man, I get it. It gets easier with time," he said in his serene deep voice, hand resting on Jonathan's shoulder. Jonathan chuckled bitterly.

"You know, for a long time, I was fine with not having friends or not having my feelings understood. And then Nancy barges in my life, my huge crush whom I always watched from afar. And we get tangled up in some serious mess that made me realize she was o much more than a crush. And then I was alone again and realized how dependent I am on her, how much I need company and the only one I could think of turning to was her. But she's not there. I know we still see each other regularly when she is not drowning in work, but it's not the same".

Byron did not take his eyes off his new friend, humming in encouragement and wishing he wasn't feeling so apprehensive at the moment. He wants to understand him, he truly does, but he is carrying a huge load on his shoulders as well and is scared that one more push will cause him to snap.

Byron does not want to snap.

"You are not alone, my friend. There are so many doors laid open to you here, so many ways in which you can grow, so many different people to meet. Take those chances. Company is not something you should depend on, but something you want in your life," Jonathan looked at Byron's eyes, a ghost of a smile on his lips. Byron was once again impressed with himself at how well he could keep his emotions in place.

"You have a void inside you Jonathan Buyers. One that can only be

filled with new things, things you are afraid to do. I believe this is your chance to face your fears and get out there".

Byron bit the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from spitting something inappropriate. God, what's wrong with him today? He wants to be sympathetic more than anything and at the same time wants to punch the shit out of *something*! He has to leave, fast, before he hurts Jonathan and deeply regrets it.

"Thanks, man, you are the most awesome freak I've met. In fact," he pauses to look at the magic of the sunset spread in front of him, "I was thinking of doing just that?"

Byron resists the urge to lift a brow, "That's great Jon".

"There is this seminar about special effects in photography tomorrow and...well; it sounds like a good place to start. Find more people with a common interest like me and you".

Byron smiles and this time it's not forced. He is genuinely happy for Jonathan and it helps bring the boiling anger inside him to a simmer. Finally!

"I'm proud of you, man".

"Thanks, really. I couldn't have done this without you. I owe you a lot, Ron".

"Don't sweat it. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't bug you to get a life on a daily basis?"

Both men laugh, a short hearty melody, a way of sharing gratitude.

And then, to Byron's surprise, Jonathan brought their hangout to an end, saying he has somewhere to be (probably going to call Nancy), sparing Byron the extra guilt.

Half an hour later, he was back in his apartment, hand-wraps rolled in a hurry and gloves slipped in his hands messily. The punching bag in his room had three patched up holes already. Tonight Byron would make a new one.

Why? Why was he so angry? What is wrong with him? Why can't he be happy? His abdominal muscles ached at his high explosive power. The punching bag dangled up and down dangerously with every punch it took.

Breathe. Focus on your breath. Focus on what's inside.

Byron rummaged the parts of his soul, all gentle and kind and giving, but also hurting and wanting...something; redemption, revenge, freedom.

He had always taken pleasure in helping others, so much it fueled his 'plain thought' to become a doctor and transformed it into a life goal. Lately, however, helping others just didn't do the cut. He was suffocating in glasses, everyone's troubles only weighed him down and the constant pain in his chest tugged at all of his nerves at once.

If only those people knew what real problems, real troubles, real pain was? If they knew the pain he had felt, would they even dare to look him in the eye and complain about their grades, their parents or significant others? Why does he have to be the one healing wounds? Who will help him heal his own? Who will notice his suffering? Who will care?

Byron shook his head. No, this is not him talking! He dared to close his eyes shut for a moment and his hook came out poorly angled, causing a pulsing pain to shout through his wrist as it collided harshly with the leather. And then it hit him.

Byron tossed his gloves aside, used to the sweat and foul smell of his hands after a good boxing session, and sat cross-legged, hands folded gently on his lap.

Breathe in, breathe out.

A single tear rolled from his eye.

Hurt, pain, indignation, jealousy. Yes, that's what it was. Speaking for him were all of those emotions he bottled up. Now that the root of his negative energy was laid bare, Byron relaxed and soothed those emotions with heartwarming reminders. Reminders of what he is

here for, reminders of duty and promise and a mission. Byron's mission.

The storm in his brain subsided, the mist was clear.

Yes, Byron Hassan had a mission, assigned to him a long time ago and ended almost as soon as he pursued it. And just when he had settled in his new normal life, his services were called again. And he really did not want to go back.

Yes, that's what had upset him.

But Byron is smarter than his emotions. He knows he cannot flee, he cannot run from this.

And so he fully accepts life's challenge and resumes his mission. For as long as that wretched number is tattooed on his arm and his head well screwed on his shoulders, he will always remember why he took the mission in the first place.

Byron Hassan heaved one long exhale, pouring every negative emotion out of his lungs, out of his system.

When he opened his eyes, he was back, armed and ready to begin.

006 was back.

Michael Wheeler, Maxine Mayfield, Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson, and Steven Harrington made their way back to Hopper's cabin, armed and ready to face whatever waited for them there. Because there was something waiting for them there, or maybe waiting for the right time to show itself. The party had to be ready to face the incoming threat.

It was amusing really; stupid and reckless, but entertaining nonetheless. That's what she thought when she poked her head from behind the tree she was hiding.

Pour souls had no idea what awaited them, something so, so much worse than a Demogorgon or the Mindflayer. She couldn't help but giggle at the nerdy names they have given the monsters of the Upside

Down.

Then again, he was a huge nerd too, so she is not surprised.

Careful not to lose them, but still partially lost in her own head, she fiddled her butterfly hairpins and twirled her blond locks around her fingers. Oh yes, she was an ace at multitasking!

The tall lanky guy, Michael Wheeler tripped over his own long feet and she had to bring her small palms, golden locks still in hand, to muffle her laughter. And they say she is clumsy! Boy, are they *dead* wrong!

Well, actually just wrong. Cause that's why she is here, right? To make sure they won't wind up dead! And if they know what's good for them they will listen to her. If not... well, they can't blame the messenger for their doom!

Especially me, the one and only Alice!

She inwardly giggled! Holly Muffins, this was so much fun! She can't wait to talk to them, to gobble down their priceless reactions. Because they *are* gonna be priceless, she knows it! How can they not be when they sport those silly faces?

Alice felt daring and stepped a little closer, surprised they hadn't spotted her... or not. No one can ever find Alice. She is a hide and seek champion, mind you!

As they neared the cabin, Alice took more and more risks; whistling, humming, and purposely stepping on dry leaves. It was so much fun, she couldn't help it! The girly high-pitched screams of Lucas Sinclair were golden and Alice hadn't had so much fun in a while! Her favorite moment was when Dustin Henderson produced a Farah Faucet spray and pointed it where he heard a branch snap, his gummy mouth almost drooling and Alice almost gave her location away. Her real location, because Alice was long gone from than spot.

But then they finally arrived at the cabin and Alice knew, it was time to put on her serious face! Strapping her bunny face mask in her head, she danced the rest of the way until she reached the first steps

of the stairs. The party's failed attempt to hush their breaths told her she had made her presence known.

Good!

Time for 018 to make some new friends!

A/N: Ooops, forgot to mention that in this story, the Buyers moved a week after the Starcourt Mall battle...so yeah, it's been about 4 months since everyone last saw each other. Now... we have a lot of new faces here, but who are our allies and who our foes? We'll have to wait and see!

Thank you for reading, I hope you are enjoying the ride and have a terrific day! All views and reviews are always appreciated.

Never forget to smile and stay awesome!

Lots of love from Irene Rays